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Operating Rail Exhibit Could Be Scranton's



Your area may be losing manufacturing jobs and unable to attract new high tech investments. So have you ever considered an investment to generate tourism?

You don't have Niagara Falls nearby?

Well, what if you could attract America's largest operating railroad museum, with 40 steam locomotives, two of which can run at 80 mph while pulling a 12-14 car load? Included in the collection is a 1944 Union Pacific "Big Boy," the world's largest locomotive, weighing in at 1.9 million pounds.

In case you haven't heard, tourism is big business. After New York State launched its "I love New York" campaign, the state's tourist income jumped from \$4.5 billion to \$9.5 billion in only three years!

And the nostalgia of steam railroads attract large numbers of people. With two small steam engines chugging along at 15 miles per hour, the Essex Valley Railroad in Essex, Conn., delighted 139,000 passengers last year. Where did they go? Nowhere, really — but to the Connecticut River.

But a far better tourist attraction is a combination of a museum with a puffing railroad. They are rare. After Pennsylvania decided to locate a state railroad museum near the Strasburg Railroad, the steam-powered line pulled in 354,000 paying passengers last year plus 130,000 into the museum across the street.

Now consider what is a real potential of attracting the Steamtown Museum Collection to your area. At present it is languishing near Bellows Falls, Vt., with only 17,000 visitors last year due to a combination of previous poor management, a very isolated spot, and opposition by Vermont to a sign on Interstate 91 or even in front of the driveway to the site. People looking for it drive right by.

I asked Jim Boyd, editor of RAILFAN

magazine, to assess the quality of the Steamtown collection of classic steam locomotives collected by seafood-packing mogul F. Nelson Blount before his death in an airplane accident in 1967:

"Everything there is no longer obtainable anywhere, whether it be the Big Boy or the Rahway Valley No. 15, a nice-sized locomotive which any museum would give a right arm for. It has a 22-mile scenic vista along the Connecticut River which is one the finest of any museum in the world, but the previous management had no sense of artistic display. Its potential as a museum is awesome, absolutely awesome," he said.

For the past year and a half, it has been directed by Don Ball Jr., author of six books for rail fans, a former employee of the Santa Fe, and organizer of the Bicentennial "Freedom Train."

"I can't think of anybody who is in a better position to revive Steamtown," says Boyd.

But shortly after taking over, Ball found that his excursion train did not meet federal safety standards and could not be repaired in time for the 1981 season. Visitors could only take walking tours last year — though trains will operate this summer. In February the roof of his largest sheds collapsed under a heavy snow damaging several locomotives. The final blow came in mid-March when the Legislature voted 2-1 against a proposal by the Vermont Travel Council to post a few directional signs to major tourist attractions.

When I heard the story, my thoughts turned to the many old rail cities whose papers publish this column — Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Reading, Scranton, Baltimore, Rochester, Syracuse, etc. One or more of them might be interested in creating America's finest operating rail museum since Vermont appears indifferent.

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